

Nancy L. Johnson

1935–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE
REPUBLICAN FROM CONNECTICUT

1983–



Image courtesy of the Member

DURING HER TWO DECADES IN THE HOUSE, Nancy L. Johnson became the first Republican woman to gain a seat on the influential Ways and Means Committee; she has become the highest-ranking woman in the history of that panel.

Nancy Elizabeth Lee was born in Chicago, Illinois, on January 5, 1935, daughter of Noble W. Lee and Gertrude Smith Lee. She attended the Lab School at the University of Chicago, earned a B.A. from Radcliffe College in 1957, and went to the University of London Courtauld Institute from 1957 to 1958, where she studied art history. Nancy Lee married Theodore Johnson, an obstetrician, and they raised three daughters: Lindsey, Althea, and Caroline. They settled in New Britain, Connecticut, in the 1960s. At the urging of the local Republican committee, Nancy Johnson successfully ran for the Connecticut senate in 1976—the first Republican from solidly Democratic New Britain to achieve this feat in more than 30 years. She served in the state senate until 1983.

In 1982, Connecticut Representative Toby Moffet decided to run for the U.S. Senate. Johnson won the Republican nomination for Moffet's House seat and faced a fellow member of the Connecticut senate, Democrat William Curry, in the general election. She ran a campaign that reflected the fiscal conservatism of the Ronald W. Reagan administration but was moderately liberal on social issues. Both candidates, for instance, were pro-choice on the abortion issue, and both opposed constitutional amendments to allow school prayer.¹ Johnson won by a margin of about 7,000 votes—52 percent to Curry's 48 percent.²

During her first term in the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Johnson served on the Committee on Public Works and Transportation, the Veterans' Affairs Committee, and the Select Committee on Children, Youth, and Families. In her third term, Johnson joined the Budget Committee. In 1988, Johnson became the first Republican woman ever named to the powerful Ways and Means Committee, relinquishing all of her other committee assignments. Eventually she rose to chair three subcommittees on Ways and Means: Oversight (104th–105th Congresses,

1995–1999), Human Resources (106th Congress, 1999–2001), and Health (107th–108th Congresses, 2001–2005). During the 104th Congress, Johnson served as chair of the House Ethics Committee (officially known as the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct), one of just a handful of women in congressional history to chair a full committee.

Among her accomplishments serving in those capacities was her successful effort to shape and steer through the House the Taxpayer Bill of Rights II. On the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, Johnson sponsored the legislation creating the State Children's Health Insurance Program and was a principal author of the bill adding prescription drug coverage, care for chronic illnesses, and other improvements to Medicare. Johnson's interests have ranged from the protection of industries and jobs in her district to federal policy for childcare and public health. She earned a reputation as an effective legislator and an important swing vote for both parties, voting with Republicans on fiscal policy and often crossing the aisle to vote with Democrats on social issues.

Johnson's legislative work also has focused on issues affecting working mothers and women generally. In 1997, she became co-chair of the Congressional Women's Caucus. She advocated a program whereby homemakers could contribute to an individual retirement account an amount similar to that contributed by their wage-earning spouse. Johnson repeatedly sought to moderate the GOP's welfare reform legislation by sponsoring a successful amendment that kept welfare recipients on the Medicaid rolls. She also fought to preserve welfare eligibility for mothers with children younger than 10 years of age, thus exempting them from the Republican-sponsored five-year cut-off limit.³

Completing her 20th year in Congress, Johnson emerged as the dean of women in the House (a distinction she shares with Marcy Kaptur of Ohio, also elected in 1982) and the dean of her Connecticut congressional delegation. In 2002, she was re-elected after one of Connecticut's House seats was removed due to reapportionment. In a race for the newly created Connecticut district seat against three-term Democratic incumbent James Maloney, Johnson prevailed by a margin of 54 to 43 percent of the vote. At the start of the 108th Congress she was the fourth-ranking Republican on Ways and Means. Johnson won re-election to a 12th term in 2004 with 60 percent of the vote, making her the longest-serving U.S. Representative in Connecticut history.⁴

FOR FURTHER READING

Biographical Directory of the U.S. Congress, "Nancy Lee Johnson," <http://bioguide.congress.gov>

NOTES

- 1 Matthew L. Wald, "Race in the Sixth District Is a Battle of Contrasts," 19 September 1982, *New York Times*: Section 11, 2.
- 2 "Election Statistics, 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.
- 3 Karen Foerstel, *Biographical Dictionary of Congressional Women* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1999): 136.
- 4 "Election Statistics 1920 to Present," <http://clerk.house.gov/members/electionInfo/elections.html>.